

Tragic Peterborough fire leads young man down path to become a firefighter

On Dec. 14, 2008, Ava Storey, 3, died in a fire at a Herbert Street townhouse

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It's been 10 years since little Ava Storey, 3, died in a fire at a Herbert Street townhouse complex in Peterborough. - Metroland File Photo



Brett Fredericks (left) and Peterborough firefighter Dave Gillespie pose for a photo at Fredericks' graduation ceremony from the Canadian Forces Fire Academy at CFB Borden in July, 2018. The Dec. 14, 2008 fire on Herbert Street in Peterborough led Fredericks down a path to become a firefighter. - Courtesy: Dave Gillespie

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Ten years ago, Brett Fredericks leaned against a fence and watched as flames tore apart his home.

All the 15-year-old kid could do was stand there as his family's possessions went up in flames during the tragic fire on Herbert Street in Peterborough, which claimed the life of a three-year-old girl and displaced 38 people.

Despite the sorrow that rocked the community, the impact of that fateful Dec. 14, 2008 fire changed Fredericks' life. What he experienced in the days following the fire led Fredericks on a path to become a firefighter, now working in the military as a Canadian Armed Forces firefighter stationed at the Greenwood, N.S. military base.

"I just remember standing by that fence and watching the firefighters fight the fire," recalls Fredericks. "It's something you can never forget."

Dec. 14 is the 10th anniversary of the fire that resulted in the [death of little Ava Storey](#). She, along with another child, were trapped in the eight-unit complex as fire engulfed the structure. Firefighters managed to reach the children and pull them outside. The boy survived, but Ava died of smoke inhalation.

Ava's mom Kristine Storey says she feels like the memories of the fire and of Ava are frozen in time.

"She'd be 13 now and to me she will always be three. I feel like she follows me everywhere," says Kristine. "I cried for two years after and it took five years for me to go out and get a job. But we're doing really well now."

She says she and her four other children, ranging in age from 22 to 15, have found a way to carry on, while holding the memory of Ava close.

"Losing Ava changed me as a person. She made me better," says Kristine. "You have to find the positive because she wouldn't want me to be sad; she would want me to be happy."

Kristine also takes comfort in Fredericks' story, knowing that positive changes have sprung forth from such a negative time in her life. She says she's remained in contact with Fredericks and his mother over the years.

"It's inspiring," adds Kristine "To choose that path to be a firefighter you have to be strong."

Fredericks' memories of the fire and its aftermath are vivid. He recalls watching the firefighters work during the early hours of the morning, only to return later that day to see the devastation and the smouldering debris.

Fredericks says he noticed that the same firefighters were still on scene after hours of battling the exhausting blaze.

"And that's when I met Dave Gillespie and at that moment I knew I wanted to be a firefighter," says Fredericks. "People were around, all down on their luck, and they (the firefighters) were still there with hope. They were willing to stay up all night and not once did you hear those guys complain."

Fredericks said he overheard Gillespie talking about a volunteer effort to collect furniture for the displaced residents. Keep in mind, this was only hours after the fire started.

Regardless, the conversation struck a chord with Fredericks.

"I thought, if they can still have high spirits and energy, why can't I?" says Fredericks.

Soon after the fire, the Peterborough community showed its true colours. Donations poured in for the families who were displaced. Christmas gifts, clothing, food and heaps of other items started to pile up. Nearby St. Paul Catholic Elementary School on Hilliard Street was transformed into a disaster relief depot. The school's library and gymnasium were used to sort and store donations as they came.

Leading the relief effort was Jodi DeNoble, manager of emergency and risk management with the City of Peterborough. She says the city, as well as many community agencies banded together to make sure the families were taken care of. DeNoble says it was like being part of a Christmas miracle.

"I had never seen support at that level before," she admits.

In only nine days after the fire, [every family who needed a place to live was able to find housing](#). Everything the families needed to get back on their feet was provided just before Christmas Day.

"Everybody came together, and at the end of it all, we said essentially it was a Christmas miracle. From the fire to only nine days later we assisted them (victims) into new housing with stocked cupboards including fixings for Christmas dinner and wrapped presents," said DeNoble. "There was so much good will."

And watching it all unfold was Brett Fredericks, a 15-year-old Adam Scott Collegiate student.

The caring he witnessed had a profound impact on him. He refused sit by idly and decided to do his part to help. He volunteered with Gillespie and other firefighters to deliver furniture to the families. Gillespie recalls that week, saying Fredericks' determination to help was an inspiration in itself. Here was a kid whose family had lost their home, yet he was still willing to put that aside to help his neighbours deal with the same thing he was going through.

"I spent a week with a quiet kid in a pickup truck picking up furniture the community was donating," says Gillespie. "The generosity he and I saw had a profound effect on many of us."

This experience planted a seed in Fredericks' mind, and he worked to become the very thing he admired most.

Gillespie and Fredericks remained connected long after the dust had settled.

Following high school graduation, Fredericks enrolled in the firefighting course at Fleming College, where he graduated in 2013.

It was there that Fredericks was awarded the Invictus Award, an honour presented to a student who refuses to give up. Gillespie was teaching a course in the program at the time and remembers having Fredericks in his class. He says Fredericks was a student who was always willing to go the extra mile and help others.

Following graduation, Fredericks took a year off to find work as a firefighter. That didn't pan out right away, so Fredericks went back to college, this time enrolling in the practical nursing program at Fleming.

"If I couldn't be a firefighter I knew I needed to help people like the (fire) crew helped me," says Fredericks.

He graduated from that program in 2016 and landed a job as a registered practical nurse in the emergency department at Peterborough Regional Health Centre. He was there for about six months, and then Fredericks' dream came true.

"I got a job offer with the Canadian Armed Forces as a firefighter," says Fredericks.

After a year of intense military firefighting training, Fredericks graduated from the Canadian Forces Fire Academy at CFB Borden in July.

Fredericks invited Gillespie to attend the graduation ceremony — an honour Gillespie was proud to be part of.

Fredericks is now stationed at the military base in [Greenwood, Nova Scotia](#). He says the base is a small community of about 4,000 people.

"We respond to medical calls and building fires, basically anything that happens on the base," says Fredericks.

Gillespie says he's proud of what Fredericks has accomplished since the Herbert Street fire. He adds that the young man has gone from a survivor to a thriver.

“He took a tragic situation and was able to look at the good and it helped him evolve as a person,” says Gillespie. “Now he’s not only serving his community, but he’s serving his country.”